

Camp San Luis Obispo

Celebrates 75 Historic Years

By Major Stan Zezotarski, Headquarters, STARC

Camp San Luis Obispo is 75 years old and it is organizing a trip down memory lane to celebrate more than seven decades as the California National Guard's Home away from home.

Established in 1927, the post was originally called Camp Merriam in honor of former Governor Frank M. Merriam. Before that, the California National Guard was, in essence, a homeless organization, roving around private ranches and public parks in search of training grounds.

The need was so prevalent that it became a gubernatorial issue in the 1920s, and Merriam campaigned on it. Soon after winning election in 1926, he teamed with State Senator Chris Jespersion and persuaded the State Legislature to purchase nearly 6,000 acres of land near San Luis Obispo in 1927. A year later, Camp Merriam was constructed.

Early structures were nearly nonexistent with soldiers living in tent cities and training in restricted terrain. The

first two permanent structures built were the officers' club and the headquarters building. The Camp's original gates were at Collusa and Ventura avenues near San Luis Obispo, but were moved to Highway 1 in the late 1980s. Guardsmen spent their annual training at Camp Merriam between 1927 and 1940. But after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Camp took on a national strategic significance. The government increased its military strength and coastal defenses during World War II, and Camp San Luis Obispo was ideal for rail, highway, and ocean access. The Army activated the Camp as a federal installation, processing more than 500,000 troops during the World War II effort. In order to house and process these troops, the Army built up the Camp's garrison area. In addition, more troops meant more water usage, requiring the Army Corps of Engineers to construct the Salinas Dam in 1942.

During the World War II era, Camp San Luis Obispo and Camp Roberts, to the north, were, collectively, the largest army training camp in the nation during that period. It was during this same time that Camp Merriam was renamed Camp San Luis Obispo. The federal government returned Camp San Luis Obispo to the California National Guard in 1947, but leased it back nearly five years later when the President mobilized the 40th Infantry Division for Korea. Camp San Luis Obispo also became the training home of the Southwestern Signal Corps. It remained under their control until 1961.

Ironically, outside events increased Camp San Luis Obispo's stock and value in 1965. Shortly after the 1965 Watts Riot, the National Guard focused and emphasized riot control and rapid deployment training. The threat of civil disorder during the late 1960s and early 1970s created a need for classroom study of civil disturbance and emergency support. In the early 1970s, California created the Civil Support Training Institute. The school trains law enforcement, safety workers, Guardsmen, and other public servants charged with protecting the lives and property of Californians.

The school only shaped what Camp San Luis Obispo has become today and what it hopes to become. In 1990, The National Guard Bureau opened the National Interagency Counterdrug Institute. The school trains law enforcement, military, and educational leaders in tactics for fighting drug demand and/or interdicting drug trafficking. The school has graduated thousands of personnel.

The Camp, however, remained a vital training center for both the Army and the California National Guard in the post-*(See "75th Anniversary" on back cover)*

Photo, left to right: MG Walter Story, Governor Frank Merriam, and BG Harry Moorhead are pictured at Camp Merriam's front gate following the camp's dedication.



75th Anniversary (continued from page 47)

World War II era. In 1951, the first Officer Candidate School Class graduated from the California Military Academy. When the federal government closed Camp Roberts and Fort Irwin in the early 1970s, the California National Guard once again returned to its original home at Camp San Luis Obispo. California Guardsmen trained at Camp San Luis Obispo instead of having to travel to training areas at out-of-state installations, until the Army reopened Camp Roberts under the command of the California Guard.

The Army maintained its presence on Camp San Luis Obispo for almost the entire history of the installation. The Army's Southwestern Signal Corps trained at Camp San Luis Obispo in the early 1950s. The Army used it as a financial center, the United States Property and Fiscal Office, for paying troops, and purchasing and tracking property. The Army recently delegated USPFO authority to pay active duty soldiers and state active duty soldiers. The 223rd Infantry Regiment continues to operate an Officer Candidate School, Noncommissioned officer school, and several military occupational skills training programs. The schools are highly successful and could persuade the Army to designate

Camp San Luis Obispo as a regional training center in the future. State tenants include the California Specialized Training Institute, the California Men's Colony, and the California Department of Forestry.

During the 75th anniversary celebration this year, the camp leadership kicked off Camp San Luis Obispo's July 4th birthday with a military march in the Cayucos Parade. On July 5th, the Post sponsored a 5K and a 10K fun run where runners darted through Camp San Luis Obispo's historical sites. Between August 19th and August 23rd, Camp San Luis Obispo's leadership will co-host an environmental terrain walk through improved watershed where hikers will see how the Post cares for listed and endangered species. The trek will also pass the ranges and training areas, and include a presentation by the Hearst Castle bomb-sniffing dogs, a golf tournament at the Dairy Creek Golf Course, an antique car show, and a rock climbing wall. Lieutenant General Herbert Temple, former Chief of the National Guard Bureau and a former military aide to Ronald Reagan when Reagan was California's governor, will speak at a dedication of the Officers' Club. 🐾



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